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Stress and Coping Associated With Acculturation Among North Korean Defectors

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Abstract

While adapting to a new culture, North Korean defectors may develop their own coping strategies and utilize coping resources to deal with acculturative stress. The purpose of this study was to identify the stress-coping strategies utilized by North Korean defectors. Using semistructured in-depth interviews, three salient themes as the major coping strategies were identified: (a) engagement in meaningful activities, (b) emotional and social support, and (c) personal growth. This study suggested that leisure professionals in South Korea create and provide a variety of recreational programs through which North Korean defectors can engage with host individuals in order to increase their health and well-being.

Keywords

[stress coping](#), [North Korean defectors](#)

When North Korean defectors enter new societies, they often encounter issues due to conflicts with regard to social and interpersonal dynamics, including different methods of interaction and communication as well as different belief systems. While they adapt to their new cultures, they may be forced to acknowledge cultural differences, such as in the society's dominant language, political systems, cultural values and beliefs, lifestyles, and social norms. Multiple studies have suggested that immigrants and refugees negotiate and modify their behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, and/or cultures in order to assimilate into their new cultures. These modifications may result in stress and psychological distress

(Bhandari, 2012; Revollo, Qureshi, Collazos, Valero, & Casas, 2011; Walker, Obasi, Wingate, & Joiner, 2008).

A growing, but limited body of literature has addressed the major source of stress related to acculturation among North Korean defectors (Jang, 2013; J. Kim et al., 2014). They concluded that the major sources of stress were coping with the trauma experienced in North Korea, language barriers, cultural differences, and discrimination experiences. Min, Jeon, and Kim (2006) found that North Korean defectors experienced negative psychological emotions, such as shame and guilt, because of the families that they left behind. The negative perceptions related to their escapes from North Korea also generate traumatic life experiences that negatively influence their health and well-being. In addition, South Koreans have maintained and developed negative stereotypes and prejudices toward North Korean defectors that state that they were second-class citizens and were lazy, passive, and dependent on South Korea (Y. Choi & Kim, 2013). Therefore, due to adaptation challenges, North Korean defectors may experience social and psychological problems that aggravate their perceptions of health and well-being.

Developing methods by which to coping with stress related to adaptation challenges can be important for North Korean defectors in regard to facilitating their adaptations to new cultures and increasing their social and psychological well-being. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) emphasized the ability to manage and cope with stressful life events in regard to maintaining positive mental health and well-being. Several researchers have provided evidence that active coping is related to a lower of depression and also moderates the effects of acculturative stress on depression and anxiety (i.e., Hovey & King, 1996). For example, J. Kim, Suh, Kim, and Gopalan (212) captured the role of coping strategies among Korean adolescent immigrants and found that they developed the ability to deal with acculturative stress associated with adaptation challenges, which resulted in happiness and psychological well-being.

North Korean defectors may develop their own coping strategies and utilize coping resources to deal with acculturative stress. A dearth of information exists about how North Korean defectors cope with their stress related to acculturation. The primary objective of this study was to understand the stress-coping mechanisms that North Korean defectors incorporate into their lives. This study also aimed to identify the stress-coping strategies utilized by North Korean defectors. In order to address these research areas, this study reviewed the literature pertaining to North Korean defectors' life experiences, their adaptation challenges and the stress that they experience while coping with acculturative stress.

North Korean Defectors' Life Experiences

The South Korean government provides North Korean defectors with financial and social support in accordance with the provisions of the 1997 Act on the Protection and Resettlement Support ([Ministry of Unification, 2014](#)). According to the Ministry of Unification, North Korean defectors are sent to Hanawon, a government resettlement center, to receive social adjustment education, medical care and professional counseling for 2 months. The Hanawon program is designed to reduce the defectors' psychological problems, help them adapt to South Korean culture and society and offer job-related training. On completion of the Hanawon program, defectors are provided with their own homes and a governmental stipend. Each adult defector receives 7,000,000 won (about \$6,341) as one-time financial support. The total settlement per household is offered based on the number of family members and their ages. The defectors also receive job-related subsidies, medical care, and educational support through special admissions and tuition assistance.

North Korean defectors come to South Korea to begin new lives, yet they often face difficulties in their new homes that they never imagined. Although the South Korean government provides diverse job support programs for defectors, many defectors struggle to find employment. [The Ministry of Unification \(2014\)](#) reported that less than 50% of defectors were employed and more than 75% of these jobs were in unskilled manual labor. [Jang \(2013\)](#) argued that little detailed follow-up exists to evaluate the efficacy of most job training programs after the defectors leave Hanawon. [Jeon, Yoon, and Um \(2004\)](#) further stated that North Korean defectors need more structural and job-related support when it comes to acculturating to their new country. [Jang \(2013\)](#) indicated that female defectors who have children find it difficult to find affordable child care so that they can work. Jang further proposed that the South Korean government needs to provide more realistic and systematic job training for the defectors and encourage employment by providing child care support for married women.

Adaptation Challenges Experienced by North Korean Defectors

Acculturation refers to a multifaceted and continuing process of embracing new cultural components, such as language, social norms, values and beliefs, as a result of cross-cultural contacts and interactions with host individuals ([Berry, 1997](#); [Berry, Trimble, &](#)

[Olmedo, 1986](#); [Gibson, 2001](#)). During the adaptation process, defectors from North Korea face numerous adaptation challenges and perceived stress ([Kang, 2006](#)). Research has suggested that the variety of adaptation challenges experienced by North Korean defectors contribute to negative psychological symptoms, such as depression, loneliness and anxiety and, as such, result in a reduction to the defectors' health and quality of life ([Lee, 2003](#); [Park & Lee, 1999](#); [Song, 2006](#)).

Prior studies have identified a variety of stressors related to acculturation, such as communication issues, economic hardships, cultural conflicts, limited social support, and a sense of guilt about family members still living in North Korea ([M. R. Kim, 2005](#); [J. K. Kim & Yang, 2011](#); [Park & Lee, 1999](#)). One of the biggest challenges identified by North Korean defectors is language barriers and, in particular, the difference between the two countries' dialects ([Min et al., 2006](#)). While English and Chinese characters mainly influenced the South Korean language, North Korea adopted policies to purge foreign words. In a similar line of research, [M. Kim \(2004\)](#) reported that stresses due to language use and social status had a negative effect on the overall health of North Korean defectors. This adaptation challenge can lead to severe and long-lasting psychological and behavioral problems, including anxiety, depression, and a high risk of suicide as well as a low level of quality of life.

A few studies have examined the relationship between adaptation to a new society and mental health among North Korean defectors. [H. C. Choi \(2013\)](#) found that level of education, self-esteem and the ability to cope with traumatic experiences in North Korea were identified as factors that influenced mental health among North Korean defectors. In addition, [Lee \(2003\)](#) concluded that defectors who experienced higher levels of stress reported lower levels of psychological well-being. Lee suggested that reducing the defectors' levels of acculturative stress plays an important role in improving the health and well-being of North Korean defectors.

[J. K. Kim and Yang \(2011\)](#) showed that defectors who had low socioeconomic statuses, lived alone and were elderly were more likely to perceive acculturative stress and have low quality of life. According to [I. Y. Han \(2001\)](#), defectors who moved to South Korea with other family members reported higher levels of depressive symptoms than those defectors who moved alone. This increase occurred due to the increase in the defectors' financial burdens. Han suggested that supporting family members as defectors generated psychological burdens and pressures that negatively affected acculturation and mental health. Furthermore, [S. Y. Han, Hur, Kim, and Chae \(2001\)](#) explored the relationship between the stage of migration and mental health among North Korean defectors. They

found that defectors who recently moved reported high levels of stress and more mental health problems than those defectors who had defected less recently.

Stress and Coping

Researchers have shown that coping resources have been used as a means of reducing stress levels and improving adaptation abilities among North Korean defectors ([J. K. Kim & Yang, 2011](#); [Park & Lee, 1999](#); [Shin, Yi, Han, Hur, & Chae, 2004](#)). They have also emphasized the role of active coping styles and methods to improve quality of life. [Park and Lee \(1999\)](#) stated that defectors who adjusted well in South Korea tended to use active coping styles (i.e., problem-solving methods) to gain positive changes in the face of adaptation difficulties. Defectors who experienced adaptation challenges preferred to use more passive methods (i.e., an emotion coping style). When they perceived and dealt with acculturative stress, defectors from North Korea tended to demonstrate active and approach coping behaviors ([Shin et al., 2004](#)).

A few researchers have emphasized the value (as it is related to health) of a problem-solving coping mechanism among North Korean defectors. They considered a problem-solving coping style to be an active coping mechanism. According to [J. K. Kim and Yang \(2011\)](#), the more the North Korean defectors demonstrated problem-solving coping skills, the less they perceived acculturative stress. In addition, [Lee \(2003\)](#) found that North Korean defectors who utilized more problem-solving coping skills reported higher levels of psychological well-being. It is noteworthy that [M. Kim \(2004\)](#) reported unanticipated effects of active coping on depression among adolescent defectors. In that case, active coping was related to lower levels of depression only at low levels of peer and community stress. Thus, it appears that active coping strategies serve as an important mechanism by which to reduce acculturative stress and increase well-being.

Several studies have also found a buffering effect of social support, in which the impact of stress on negative outcomes is lessened in the presence of social support ([Jeon et al., 2004](#); [S. Kim, 2010](#)). For example, [M. R. Kim \(2005\)](#) examined the effects of adjustment stress and social support on depressive symptoms among North Korean defectors. Various forms of social support from religious groups, society and defector organization, helped North Korean defectors decrease depressive symptoms. In a similar line of research, [J. Kim et al. \(2014\)](#) stressed that, not only is social support crucial in itself for positive well-being, but it also provides a powerful coping resource for North Korean defectors experiencing stress in their lives.

Some researchers have suggested that participation in leisure activities may provide a context to which to foster positive intergroup contacts and interactions between individuals of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds (e.g., [Cameron, Rutland, Brown, & Douch, 2006](#)). For example, [J. Kim et al. \(2014\)](#) used an extended Gestalt relationship improvement program as an intervention when attempting to reduce prejudice between South Koreans and North Korean defectors. They suggested that these activities may provide a way for North Korean defectors to gain new cultural perspectives and knowledge and may act as a catalyst for purposeful and meaningful understanding between South Koreans and North Korean defectors. In addition, [Song \(2006\)](#) found that North Korean defectors who actively engaged in leisure and religious activities had rich opportunities to interact with South Koreans and develop cross-group friendship, which contributed to their social benefits. In a school setting, [S. H. Kim, Song, and Choi \(2009\)](#) found that art therapy provides rich opportunities for defectors to alleviate a level of acculturative stress and improve their ability to adapt to a school environment.

Therefore, North Korean defectors may have their own strategies by which to deal with adaptation challenges and exert personal efforts to adjust to a new culture. Using this background, the purpose of this study was to explore what coping strategies North Korean defectors utilized when they perceived acculturative stress. The data were collected through a combination of individual interviews and focus groups.

Methods

This study employed semistructured in-depth interviews. This method enabled the researchers to capture the dynamics of the participants' personal experiences as well as probe variations of a social phenomenon and its conditions ([Crabtree & Miller, 1999](#); [McMillan & Schumacher, 2001](#)). In particular, this method is most appropriate and useful when researchers aim to capture specific topics and subjects within a diverse group, such as ethnic minorities, people of color, homosexuals and the poor ([Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2005](#); [Rubin & Rubin, 2005](#)). This method also adheres to the purpose of this study, which is to probe stress coping among North Korean defectors.

Participants

This study collaborated with the Taejo Mountain Youth Center, which offers a variety of activities for North Korean defectors. The research team had permission to contact North Korean defectors and the university institutional review board approved this study. The

research team provided the participants with information regarding confidentiality. The team also provided informed consent forms and explained that the participants were under no obligation to complete their participation. The participants voluntarily engaged in this research study and only their last names (pseudonyms) were used for identification.

A total of 17 North Korean defectors participated in this study. Their ages ranged from 14 to 21 years; 10 of the participants were male and 7 were female. The average period since their defection from North Korea was 20 months. Among the participants, 10 participants were high school students, 2 attended universities, and 5 were middle school students. After conducting the interview with the 16th participant, the research team realized that no new information had emerged from the interview data. As such, they conducted an additional interview with the 17th participant and concluded that they had reached a saturation point. The participants were compensated approximately US\$20.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

Institutional review board approval was obtained from the university. The research team contacted the director of the Taejo Mountain Youth Center and obtained permission to have informal meetings with potential participants at the center. At the meeting with the director, the research team provided the participants with information on the purpose of and procedure used within the study. After delivering a brief presentation, potential participants informed the research team whether they were interested in participating in the study. The research team obtained informed consent from the participants, who also agreed to allow their interviews to be audio-recorded.

The research team conducted semistructured in-depth interviews at the education room in the Taejo Mountain Youth Center. Each interview lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. The research team created and developed the interview protocol in order to increase the relevance to the topic of the questions asked. In order to capture coping strategies among the participants, this study modified interview questions based on the grand tour and mini tour interview strategies suggested by [J. Kim, Suh, Kim, and Gopalan \(2012\)](#). The questions asked were: “How did you react to the various stressors that you described?,” “How do you deal with adaptation challenges?,” and “What resources did you utilize in order to manage stress related to adaptation challenges?” All the interviews were conducted in Korean. In order to translate Korean into English, three graduate students who are bilingual and experienced in qualitative studies participated in the back-translation process.

The five-step analytic process suggested by [McCracken \(1988\)](#) was used to analyze the data. In order to obtain rich data, this study used the constant comparative method as it allowed us to simultaneously code and analyze the data in order to develop concepts and compare interviewees to one another ([Lincoln & Guba, 1985](#)).

Step 1: The research team generated raw data for the data analysis. Each researcher read each transcript and made notations in the margins. In this stage, each researcher prepared to extract general ideas from each transcript.

Step 2: With general ideas from each transcript, each researcher developed preliminary descriptive categories and compared them to the categories created by the other researchers. The research team created consistent patterns of descriptive categories.

Step 3: The research team examined the descriptive categories of data and identified connections and similar and/or different patterns within the data.

Step 4: The research team collected clusters of categorized ideas and produced the basic themes and subthemes of the data.

Step 5: The research team interpreted the basic themes and subthemes and selected data examples using direct quotes to support the identified themes.

Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research

This study employed three strategies in order to increase the credibility of the data. First, the research team participated in the member-checking process and, of the 17 participants, 7 voluntarily engaged in the member-checking process. The research team provided the participants with information regarding interpretations of the data and the participants expressed their satisfaction with the interpretations.

Second, an expert review process was applied to this study. Each investigator had expertise in understanding qualitative data analyses and capturing themes. Using quotes and illustrative examples of each theme, the research team came up with thoughtful considerations and consensus.

Third, this study followed a back-translation process, as suggested by [Suh, Kagan, and Strumpf \(2009\)](#), in order to increase the accuracy of the transcriptions. Three graduate students who are bilingual and were not part of the research team participated in the back-translation process in order to validate the accuracy of each transcription.

Findings

North Korean defectors shared a variety of experiences related to the adaptation process after moving to South Korea. After analyzing the data, this study identified three salient themes as the major coping strategies that the participants utilized: (a) engagement in meaningful activities, (b) emotional and social support, and (c) personal growth. These identified themes indicated that the participants created their own coping strategies in order to cope with their stress as it was related to adaptation challenges. It appears that these strategies may help participants improve their perceptions of health and well-being and facilitate the adaptation process.

Engagement in Meaningful Activities

All the participants identified various adaptation challenges associated with their new culture and migration experiences, including communication issues, discrimination experiences, culture shock, different cultural values and beliefs, and a lack of social support. Such adaptation challenges created acculturative stress that negatively influenced health and well-being among the participants.

Engagement in meaningful activities was identified as one of the most effective coping strategies for dealing with acculturative stress. These activities included exercise, sports, computer games, spiritual activities, culture-related activities and traveling. By participating in such activities, they increased their positive interactions with others and developed abilities to deal with various types of acculturative stress. For example, Youna (female, 18 years) said that her engagement in social activities with her friends, such as watching movies and attending social events, helped her deal with various stressors related to acculturation.

According to all of the participants, participation in meaningful activities helped them reduce their level of acculturative stress and improved their positive feelings and emotions. Most of the participants said that going to *norabang* where there are rooms equipped with singing and dancing was effective in reducing acculturative stress. They also mentioned that, in North Korea, they had not been exposed to such entertainment as singing with friends and/or family members. At the *norabang*, they socialized with their Korean friends and/or other defectors and reduced their own negative feelings and emotions. In addition, they believed that they had a better understanding of Korean pop culture and music genres after visiting the *norabang*. Such knowledge served as a way which to gain cultural understandings. For example, Chul (male, 18 years) said

I hang out with my friends and typically go to norabang. It is fun to sing in front of my friends and I have had good opportunities to get to know them better. We have a really good time and dancing and singing with them blew my stress away.

He also mentioned that he became familiar with South Korean songs and pop culture, which helped him to understand South Korean culture as well.

Most of the participants believed that engagement in activities provided rich opportunities to establish a sense of friendship and expand social networks. They stated that they experienced limited social interactions with host individuals because of cultural differences and negative stereotypes toward North Korean defectors. By engaging in various activities in which they were motivated to participate, they established and developed friendships with host individuals. For example, some of the participants mentioned that they participated in PC bangs (i.e., a form of an Internet cafe created as a social meeting place where participants could engage in cooperative computer games with others, especially host individuals). They thought that the games promoted social circumstances by promoting the creation of social groups in order to play the games more effectively. As a result, they created social bonds and friendships and reduced the participants' levels of stress. For example, Honey (male, 16 years) said that he engaged in online games with friends and developed intimate friendships. It appears that such positive interactions with host individuals helped the participants to reduce their acculturative stress.

Some of the participants were involved in various forms of spiritual activities and, as a result, considered themselves to be better able to cope with acculturative stress because they were able to utilizing their inner peace and focus on important life purposes. For example, Sunjung (female, 15 years) mentioned that sharing her spiritual journey with others helped her to build relationships and enhance her stress management skills. When she struggled with understanding a new school system and different peer dynamics, she engaged in spiritual activities, such as attending fellowships and participating in Bible study, as a means to cope.

All of the male participants mentioned that physical activity engagement, such as soccer, badminton, exercise and basketball, was an effective stress reliever. When they played sports, they felt that they eliminated their stress and increased their health and well-being. According to Chungong (male, 19 years), who enjoyed soccer stated,

Since I have moved to South Korea, I have realized that South Korean students study very hard to be successful and catching up the grades was stressful because I had not had an opportunity to get a formal education in North Korea. . . . Playing soccer with my friends was my favorite sport and really helped me to deal with stress.

He also mentioned that playing soccer was helpful with regard to fostering social relationships with others.

These examples indicate that participation in personally meaningful activities provides rich opportunities for participants to reduce acculturative stress and increase positive feelings and emotions. As such, it appears that meaningful activity involvement serves as an important coping strategy.

Emotional and Social Support

Receiving emotional and social support from intra and inter groups was another salient theme in regard to coping resources identified by the participants. They mentioned that emotional and social support served as important coping resources that helped them to increase their psychological well-being. The major social support system was obtained via interactions with other defectors. The background of this social establishment was that they shared their similar migration experiences as defectors and easily developed intimate friendships. In particular, when the participants encountered adaptation challenges, such as language barriers, discrimination experiences and cultural differences, they provided emotional and social support for each other. In fact, many of the participants used similar terms to value their friendships with others, such as “they are like my family members,” “without their advice and encouragement, I would be so unsatisfied with my life” and “we exchanged much information for our adaptation to Korea.”

In addition, social support from other defectors helped most of the participants to develop strategies related to their cultural adaptation by exchanging practical information and knowledge related to acculturation. They mentioned that, by interacting with other defectors, they gained cultural knowledge and promoted cultural understandings that served as an important coping strategy for dealing with adaptation challenges. It appears that the development of cultural understanding via gaining valuable acculturation information from other defectors helped them to become well acculturated to their new culture. For example, Daegil (male, 19 years) stated

They [the other defectors] were very helpful as they shared their acculturation experiences and provided invaluable advice to me. When I experienced adaptation challenges, they shared their experiences and adaptation strategies and such advice and encouragement helped me to adapt to South Korea’s culture and society.

He also mentioned that receiving emotional and social support from others helped to reduce his level of stress associated with acculturation.

Most of the participants thought that they had established and developed a sense of friendship with the host individuals. Such friendships generated a positive social support system for them, which served as an important coping resource. Even though they believed that they had limited opportunities to socialize with host individuals because of cultural difference, they felt a sense of connectedness and belonging to the community. Heart (female, 18 years) said that her Korean friends educated her with Korean pop culture and music. She obtained valuable information from her Korean friends and felt that she belonged to a group of friends. In addition, Chullee (male, 18 years) mentioned that his Korean friends protected him because other peers at the school bullied him. He felt that his Korean friends were supportive of his adaptation to the school.

Some of the participants who moved to South Korea with family members experienced strong connections to them. They believed that their family members who stayed in North Korea would be punished for their defections. Such mental guilt was one of the major stressors that the participants experienced. In spite of this mental guilt, they focused on the family members who had moved with them to South Korea and developed more intimate relationships with them. They also mentioned that their family members experienced adaptation challenges and shared love and support with each other in a family setting. Such intimate family relationships serve as an important coping strategy for dealing with stressful situations that occur due to acculturation.

The development and maintenance of social support from friends and family members served as an important coping resource for participants. The participants shared various migration experiences with others and coped well with adaptation challenges. In addition, social support may play an important role in facilitating acculturation, such as cultural understanding and cultural knowledge, for the participants.

Personal Development

Personal development is the last coping strategy identified by the participants. While they adapted to a new society, most of the participants experienced improved positive emotions and attitudes that allowed them to revisit the purpose of their lives. Whenever they encountered adaptation challenges, they expressed an appreciation for life and sought to deal with the adaptation challenges with clear life goals. In particular, most of the participants appreciated the opportunity to pursue higher education because they had not had an opportunity to shape their life goals and get an education in North Korea. For example, Kim (female, 19 years) mentioned that she had lived in low-income community and was affected by food insecurity and hunger in North Korea. She believed that adaptation to a new society was psychologically distressing, but focused on her current

life circumstances and enjoyed reshaping her life journey. It seems that new life opportunities served as a coping strategy for the participants

In terms of acculturation, they mentioned that they needed to embrace new cultural components, such as language, culture, customs and social norms. Even though they encountered some adaptation challenges, they believed that they developed a sense of positive emotions and attitudes. They used different expressions that described positive aspects of their mindsets as a way of dealing with adaptation challenges, such as “it is not easy to adjust myself to a new culture, but I stayed focused on having a positive mind,” “my positive attitude helped me to deal with my stress and negative feelings” and “I focused on positive thoughts and ideas when I perceived acculturative stress.” Such statements indicate that they created positive emotions and attitudes and utilized them to deal with acculturative stress.

Some of the participants believed that their adaptation challenges allowed them to develop mental strength, which reduced acculturative stress. They mentioned that they tended to replace negative thoughts and ideas generated by acculturation with healthier thoughts, behaviors and feelings. It appears that they became mentally and psychologically stronger and increased their resilience to acculturative stress. For example, Daegil (male, 19 years) said,

When I came to [South] Korea, I had had unpleasant migration experiences and perceived an enormous amount of stress to deal with. . . . Ironically, such experiences have made me stronger psychologically and enabled me to focus on positive things and emotions in my life.

He also stated that he increased his sense of happiness due to his mental strength.

In addition, adaptation to a new society provided rich opportunities for some of the participants to promote cultural confidence and expand their worldviews. According to the participants, they increased their senses of confidence and self-esteem by improving their cultural understandings and expanding their worldviews. Such positive outcomes contributed to the development of coping strategies and coping resources. Sunghee (male, 20 years) stated that he became more familiar with South Korean culture and society because of cultural knowledge and cultural understandings. Similarly, Toki (female, 15 years) mentioned that, due to adaptation challenges, she had a better understanding of the new culture and society and built coping abilities to deal with her stress. She also mentioned that she fostered her self-esteem because of her increased self-confidence.



Based on the participants' statements and experiences, they cultivated their life purposes and focused on positive thoughts and ideas. Such positive changes served as coping

strategies and led to personal development. In addition, it appears that the participants developed resilience and built self-confidence and esteem as a result of coping with adaptation challenges and increased health and well-being.

Discussion

This qualitative study is an initial exploration of how North Korean defectors deal with adaptation challenges during acculturation. The North Korean defectors who participated in this study experienced numerous challenges associated with acculturation and created and developed their own specific coping strategies to deal with them. This study suggests that specific coping strategies would be beneficial for psychosocial health among North Korean defectors.

Leisure scholars have suggested that participation in personally meaningful activities can be important coping resources for the development of coping abilities and facilitating personal growth that contributes to good health and well-being (e.g., [Chun & Lee, 2008](#); [D. V. Coleman, 1993](#); [D. Coleman & Iso-Ahola, 1993](#); [Iso-Ahola & Park, 1996](#)). Empirical evidence exists that individuals use leisure as a way by which to cope with stress and improve psychological health ([Hutchinson, Baldwin, & Oh, 2006](#); [Iwasaki & Bartlett, 2006](#); [Iwasaki, Mackay, Mactavish, Ristock, & Bartlett, 2006](#); [Mactavish & Iwasaki, 2005](#)). This study supported previous findings that showed that North Korean defectors engaged in various leisure activities as coping resources and gained social and psychological benefits through these activities. In particular, the participants used leisure as a coping strategy for social support, cultivating positive affirmations, reconnecting spirituality, diverting their focus, and rejuvenating through leisure activities. This study suggests that leisure activities serve as an important coping resource in regard to dealing with adaptation challenges for North Korean defectors.

The findings of this study show that participation in meaningful activities provided the participants with rich opportunities to facilitate acculturation and overcome adaptation challenges. Some studies have explored the value of leisure engagement from the perspective of the immigrants ([J. Kim, 2012](#); [J. Kim, Suh, Kim, & Gopalan, 2012](#)). These previous studies had provided evidence that Korean immigrants participated in various meaningful activities and, as a result, managed acculturative stress and had increased social and psychological health. Thus, this study expands the body of literature that shows that North Korean defectors use leisure to manage and cope with a variety of adaptation challenges.

[Folkman and Moskowitz \(2004\)](#) introduced variables that affect a stress-coping mechanism, such as the social aspects of coping, religious coping, emotional support, positive mind-sets and thoughts, and future-oriented dimensions. Among these variables, the researchers emphasized the value of social support as a buffer against stress ([Carpenter & Scott, 1992](#); [Holtzman, Newth, & Delongis, 2004](#)). They concluded that individuals who received positive social support exerted significant efforts to cope with stress and used a variety of coping strategies that resulted in increased life satisfaction. The findings of this study are aligned with previous findings, which showed that social support is crucial in regard to be used as a coping resource and increasing positive well-being among North Korean defector participants.

It is interesting to note that, in spite of the participants' limited social interactions with the host individuals, they created their own social support systems with other defectors who had similar experiences and supported their acculturation experiences. Social psychologists suggest that individuals tend to interact with others who have similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds ([Brewer, 2007](#); [Rustemli, Mertan, & Ciftci, 2000](#)). This idea suggests that North Korean defectors have a tendency to interact with other defectors and easily develop friendships and intimate social relationships with them. Such intragroup relationships have served as additional important coping resources for North Korean defectors. In addition, North Korean defectors receive emotional and social support from host individuals, which produces positive intergroup interactions and friendships. This study indicates that the participants experienced the dynamics of interpersonal relationships with other defectors and host individuals and utilized this social support as a coping strategy so that they could gain social and psychological benefits.

A few studies have provided evidence that immigrants experience personal growth as a result of adaptation challenges ([J. Kim & Kim, 2013](#); [J. Kim, Suh, & Heo, 2012](#)). In a recent study, [J. Kim, Malonebeach, Heo, Kim, and Kim \(2015\)](#) found that Korean immigrants experienced personal growth associated with acculturation, such as social relationships, personal resources, life philosophies, and coping skills. They indicated that, in spite of the adaptation challenges, immigrants identified personal coping resources, the purpose of their lives, coping strategies and social support. This study supported the idea that North Korean defectors facilitated personal growth, such as positive emotions, an appreciation of life and the purpose of life, and that these positive experiences contributed to the creation of coping strategies and resources for them to cope with stress.

Some limitations of this study need to be noted. First, this study mainly focused on coping strategies used by participants to cope with adaptation challenges. Other factors may exist

that influence stress-coping mechanisms, such the level of acculturation, acculturative stress, migration motivation, and length of stay. Future study is needed to investigate what factors influence coping mechanisms among North Korean defectors.

In addition, the present study did not explore the participants' stress-coping strategies and resources before they moved to their new society. It may be helpful for future research to explore the differences in stress-coping mechanisms before and after their migrations.

Finally, this study only focused on a small sample of North Korean defectors and used a qualitative research method. As such, it is difficult to generalize the findings. If future researchers could utilize a quantitative approach with regard to how the participants cope with stress, they may provide interesting and rich data that could be generalized to larger sections of the North Korean defector population.

In spite of these limitations, this study provides insights in regard to how North Korean defectors cope with their adaptation challenges and suggests that leisure professionals in South Korea create and provide a variety of recreational programs through which North Korean defectors can engage with host individuals in order to increase their health and well-being. From a community-based perspective, the creation of social support is critical in regard to ameliorating negative psychological symptoms and increasing social and psychological benefits among North Korean defectors. Therefore, this study stresses the importance of social support as a coping resource and coping strategy among North Korean defectors and suggests that the South Korean government should provide a variety of community-based programs and activities to help North Korean defectors develop a sense of connectedness and belonging to the community.

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